The Polished Mind

A Parable of Awareness from the Anangana Sutta

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A Map of the Mind: The Four Individuals

The venerable Sariputta begins by proposing that all people can be understood through two simple questions:

1. Are there defilements present in the mind?
   Are there defilements present in the mind?
2. Is the person aware of them?

	Unaware of their state	Aware of their state
Defilements Present	The Defiled & Unaware	The Defiled & Aware
No Defilements Present	The Undefiled & Unaware	The Undefiled & Aware

Within each pair, one is considered superior and one inferior. The distinction is the key to progress.

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The Parable of the Bronze Bowl

To explain the significance of these four states, Sariputta uses a powerful analogy. The mind, he suggests, is like a bronze bowl brought from a shop. Its ultimate condition—whether it becomes a treasured vessel or a piece of refuse—depends entirely on the care and awareness of its owner.

Defilement

Awareness

Effort

Neglect

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The Two Tarnished Bowls

The Defiled & Unaware

This person is like a tarnished, dusty bowl whose owner neither uses it nor cleans it, but tosses it in a dusty place. Without effort or attention, it only grows filthier over time.

This person feels no urge, makes no effort, and arouses no energy to abandon their defilements. They die with a mind that is tarnished by greed, hatred, and delusion.

The Defiled & Aware

This person is also like a tarnished, dusty bowl. But the owner uses it, cleans it, and does not abandon it. With consistent care, it can be restored to its original brilliance.

This person feels the urge, makes the effort, and arouses the energy to abandon their defilements. They can die with a mind that is undefiled.

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The Two Clean Bowls

The Undefiled & Unaware

This person is like a clean, bright bowl. But the owner does not use or clean it, leaving it in a dusty place. Through neglect, the pristine surface will inevitably become tarnished.

Not knowing their own purity, this person focuses on the 'beautiful,' allowing greed to stain their mind. They risk dying with a mind that has become defiled.

The Undefiled & Aware

This person is like a clean, bright bowl whose owner uses it, cleans it, and cares for it. Through mindful maintenance, it only grows more brilliant and radiant over time.

Knowing their own purity, this person guards their mind against the 'beautiful.' They die with a mind that is stainless and undefiled.

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“Venerable Sariputta, you speak of ‘defilements.’ But what, exactly, are these things things to which the name ‘defilement’ is given?”

—The venerable Moggallana

Sariputta’s Answer

It is the name for the evil, unwholesome states of mind born from wicked desires.

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The Anatomy of a Defilement

The Wicked Desire Arises

A monk commits a fault and thinks: “I hope the other monks do not find out about this fault of mine.”

→

The Desire is Thwarted

The other monks do, in fact, find out about the fault.

→

The Defilement is Born

He becomes angry and resentful that his fault is now known.

Key Insight: The anger and the resentment ***are*** the defilement. It is not the original fault, but the reaction to the unfulfilled desire for secrecy.

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A Catalog of Wicked Desires

These desires manifest as attachments to reputation, status, and preference. They are the seeds of anger and resentment.

Reputation & Secrecy

May my fault not be known.

May I be corrected in private, not in public.

May I be corrected by a peer, not by someone I see as unequal.

Status & Recognition

May the Teacher ask questions only of me.

May I always lead the monks into the village.

May I have the seat of honor in the dining hall.

May I be the one to give the closing sermon.

Influence & Authority

May I be the one who instructs the monks.

May I be the one who instructs the nuns.

May I be the one who instructs the lay followers.

Possessions & Comfort

May I receive the best offerings (robes, food, lodging, medicine).

May others not receive such fine offerings.

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The Appearance of Virtue is Not Enough

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A monk may live an ascetic life—dwelling in the forest, eating only alms food, wearing robes made from rags. But if the wicked desires and their resulting defilements have not been abandoned in his heart, he will not be truly honored or respected by his peers. Why?

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The Carcass in the Beautiful Bowl

Sariputta compares this monk to a pristine bronze bowl, carried through the market square for all to admire. But its owners have filled it with the carcass of a snake, a dog, or a human, and covered it with another beautiful lid.

“When someone opens the lid, they are overcome with aversion, disgust, and loathing. Even the hungry lose their appetite. Who then would speak of those who have already eaten?”

So it is with the monk whose inner defilements are perceived.

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The Feast in the Nourishing Bowl

Conversely, a monk may live in a village monastery and wear fine robes offered by laypeople. But if he is seen to be free from the taint of wicked desires, his peers will give him honor, respect, and reverence.

This is like a bronze bowl filled with fine rice, pure ghee, and delicious curries. When it is opened, people are filled with delight.

“Even those who are already full feel a desire to eat. Who then would speak of the hungry?”

So it is with the monk whose inner purity is perceived.

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The Wheelwright’s Art

Moggallana adds an analogy of his own. He recalls watching Samiti, a wheelwright’s son, shaping a wheel. An old ascetic, formerly a wheelwright himself, watched and thought, “If only he would shave this crook, this warp, this flaw.”

And just as the ascetic thought it, Samiti the wheelwright’s son shaved away that very crook, warp, and flaw. It was as if he were shaving the wheel heart to heart with the ascetic’s mind.

Moggallana declares that Sariputta’s sermon does the same—it shaves away the imperfections of those who are insincere and affirms the purity of those who are sincere.

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A Garland for the Pure Mind

For the sincere practitioners—those who are humble, restrained, mindful, and energetic—this teaching is not a rebuke. It is a welcome gift to be cherished.

It is like a young man or woman, fond of ornaments, who has just washed their head. If they were to be offered a garland of lotus or jasmine flowers, they would take it with both hands and place it on their head, the noblest part of the body.

So too, the sincere monk receives this teaching, drinks it in, and places it in the highest place—their heart.

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The Radiance of an Awakened Mind

The state of the mind is not fixed. It is the direct result of our attention. The path to purity is a continuous process of seeing the tarnish for what it it is and applying the effort to polish it away. The ultimate goal is not merely to be clean, but to *know* the mind's clarity and to guard it with vigilance, allowing it to shine with its inherent brilliance.

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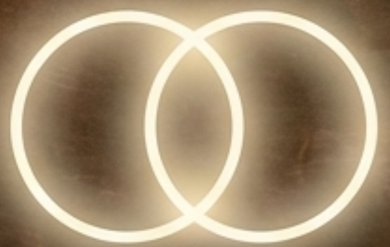
Thus, these two great beings rejoiced in each other's good words.



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